

A Most Peculiar Birthday Present

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Summary: On Steve's birthday, he is assigned to protect a young witness in a gang murder case. How far will he go to save her?

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Rated PG: Mild language and violence. Synopsis: On his birthday, Steve gets a surprise visit from Captain Newman. He's told that he has to protect a twelve-year old girl for several days until she can testify in court. When her life is threatened, Steve must find her assailant and clear her father's name as the girl's life hangs in the delicate balance.

A Most Peculiar Birthday Present

Baby-sitting was not something on Lieutenant Steve Sloan's mind as he and his friends, Jesse and Amanda, and his father, Mark, were sitting around his table celebrating his birthday. The trio finished "Happy Birthday" and Steve was ready to blow out the candles. "Don't forget to make a wish!" Amanda interrupted. Steve blew out the candles and watched as the smoke drifted toward the ceiling. "What did you wish for?" Jesse asked eagerly. He always acted like a six-year old trapped in an ER doctor's body. "He can't tell. Otherwise it won't come true," Amanda told him and eyed the cake hungrily. "Okay. Okay," Steve said as he started to cut the cake. "What are you doing for the talent show?" Jesse asked Mark through a mouthful of cake. "Talent show?" Steve had no idea what they were talking about. "Community General holds a talent show every year to raise money for pediatrics. The whole staff has to perform or help out in some way," Amanda explained. "I thought it was optional," Jesse said, once more spewing crumbs. "It is," Amanda agreed. "But if you don't, Administration will stick you with crummy shifts." Mark was about to put in his thought when the doorbell rang. Mark got up to answer it, but then remembered that he was a guest and all he had to do was sit there and enjoy the cake. Besides, Steve was already getting the door. Steve opened the door to a familiar face. Captain Newman. Swell, he thought. Newman was a tall man, almost as tall as Steve. His hard

features made it difficult to tell whether or not he was telling a joke. "Got one for you," Newman said. That's when Steve noticed that he was holding a street girl, maybe twelve or thirteen, by the wrist. Their eyes locked and something clicked. Newman pushed her into the house. She found a chair and slouched down as Jesse, Amanda and Mark came into the living room. "What's this?" Steve asked angrily. It was his birthday of all days. "Name's Amy Porter. She saw a gang member go down and needs police protection until next week's trial." A small grin slowly crept across Newman's face. "You don't mean..." Steve groaned. "I need to talk to you outside for a moment, Sloan," Newman said. After ten uncomfortable minutes, Steve came back inside. He closed the door with a sigh, but tried to make the best of a bad situation. "I'm Steve," he said, sticking out his hand to Amy. Amy reached for it, but then pulled it away and avoided his eyes. Steve put his hand in his pocket and shrugged. "Hi there. I'm Mark," Mark introduced himself. "This is Amanda and this is Jesse." He gestured to them respectively. "Hi," she said softly. Hearing her tone of voice almost made Steve feel bad for being angry with her coming. Almost. Jesse looked at his watch. "I'd love to stay and chat, but my shift starts soon. I'll see you guys later." He retreated to the kitchen, got his cake and left, after wishing Steve a happy birthday. "My shift starts soon, too," Amanda said and followed Jesse out. Just before she left, Steve handed her the file. "Look over the autopsy notes and see if you can come up with anything new. Okay, Amanda?" "No problem, Steve. Happy birthday." "I've got an early shift tomorrow. Nice meeting you, Amy. Happy birthday, son," Mark said. And with that, Steve and Amy were alone. "Sleeping arrangements?" Steve asked. "Already?" Amy said, a little bit of attitude in her voice. "It's nearly ten." She shrugged. "Have it your way. I'm going to bed." Steve went into his bedroom and fell into a fitful sleep.

"Jesse, I'm telling you I set it right here," Amanda panicked and started going through her desk in her beloved pathology lab. "Maybe you left it in your car," Jesse suggested, leaning against the autopsy table. His hand touched something cold and he leapt away in surprise. Amanda snickered and returned to her search as Mark came into the lab. "What did she lose?" Mark asked, yawning. "I did not lose anything. I... temporarily misplaced it," Amanda replied, trying to remain calm. "What did she temporarily misplace?" "She got a case file from Steve and now she lost it," Jesse responded. "I did not lose anything!" Amanda exclaimed, beginning to lose it herself. "What was in the file?" Mark inquired. "Steve wanted us to check out the William Porter case." "Porter. Porter." Mark tried to remember when he had last heard the name. "Why does that sound so familiar?" "It's the last name of the girl staying with Steve. Isn't it?" Jesse said. "Ah ha!" Amanda exclaimed triumphantly, pulling a brown portfolio out from under a stack of papers. "Told you, Jesse." Jesse rolled his eyes at her and asked, "Is there any relation between the two Porters? It is a pretty common name, you know." Amanda looked through the file for a moment and back up at Jesse, "As a matter of fact, there is. Older brother."

Steve woke up early and surprised himself. It was uncharacteristic of him to wake up early, but he found it difficult to sleep the night before. In the back of his mind, he thought it might have something to do with Amy, but convinced himself it was just the thunderstorm that had kept him awake. At the moment, he was sitting at his kitchen table, enjoying a bowl of cereal and reading the newspaper. Amy came into the kitchen, yawning and rubbing her eyes. Steve watched on in

mild interest as she tried to pry open the cereal box from the bottom. Amy realized what she was doing and flipped the box over. She saw Steve watching her out of the corner of her eye, but tried to act nonchalant about it. She began to pour cereal out onto a plate. "You gonna have some milk with that plate full of cereal?" Steve asked, amused. Amy glared at him, but a small smile involuntarily crept across her face when he turned away.

Amanda and Mark walked down the bright hallways of Community General, with Jesse tagging along behind them. "What's the cause of death?" Mark asked, rubbing his eyes. With an apartment fire and two car accidents, it had not been an easy morning. "Multiple gunshot wounds. One in the head and two in the chest," Amanda responded. "Not a pleasant way to go," Jesse remarked, looking completely disgusted. "How old was he?" Mark asked. "Nineteen," Amanda answered, her eyes wandering to the floor. A silence followed. "Any suspects?" Mark was starting to get into the case a little bit. "It says here that his father, Richard Porter, has been arrested and convicted." Mark was stunned. How could a father kill his own son? Jesse started to say something, but Amanda stopped him. "No comments from the peanut gallery," she said. "I was just going to ask if there were any witnesses," he whined. "There was only one. Amy." "She saw the murder?" Jesse asked, unbelieving. "When did it happen?" "A few months ago." "And then witnesses another murder? Poor girl. She's been through so much," Mark said, unhappily. Amanda turned to him. "Want to see this?" "If you don't mind," Mark said, taking the file from Amanda's hand and digging his glasses out of his pocket. Mark had just slipped on his glasses when Jesse made a comment. "If the father has been arrested and convicted, then why does Steve want us to look at this?" "He doesn't think the father did it," Amanda replied, remembering what Steve had told her. Jesse rolled his eyes. "Like father, like son," he grumbled. "Can't let a sleeping dog lie. Or should I say 'can't let a case stay closed?'" "I don't think he did either," was the reply. "And why not?" Jesse wanted to know. "For one, he has an alibi. Shaky as it is. And two, he didn't have a motive." "He was an alcoholic. Maybe he was in a drunken rage," Jesse offered. "There was no murder weapon found," Mark continued. "Who was she covering up for then?" Amanda asked. "I don't think she knew she was covering up for anybody."

"Could you sit down? You're making me nervous," Steve said, unable to concentrate on the crossword puzzle. Amy had been standing at the window of his sliding door watching the rain pour down for nearly twenty minutes. Amy shot him a look and sat down. "Whatever." She continued to watch through the window. Steve struggled to make conversation as he turned back to his crossword puzzle. "What's a five letter word for 'to bother?'" he asked. It was better than nothing. Amy thought for a moment and responded, "Steve." He shot her a look, but Amy seemed unaffected as she turned to watch out the window again. Steve set the crossword puzzle down and took interest. "What is your fascination with the rain?" Steve asked. Amy smiled wistfully. "Just brings back some memories." Suddenly, her eyes flashed with excitement. "Let's go splash in the puddles!" she said, leaping up from the chair. This was not the Amy from yesterday. She started to pull on Steve's arm. "Me and Sarah and Bill-" She suddenly got quiet. Steve began to get concerned. "What is it?" "Nothing. Forget it. Stupid." Steve could see Amy's eyes halfway brimming with tears and halfway flashing with anger. Steve tried another approach. "I'll watch you splash if you tell me." Steve chose his words carefully. Amy considered it for a moment. Then a broad grin broke

out across her face.

Meanwhile, at good old C.G., Mark was talking with Jesse near the nurses station. Susan was pretending to look over charts, but Mark could tell she was watching Jesse out of the corner of her eye. "When I get home, I'm taking a long nap," Mark said, yawning. "Join the club," Jesse remarked, rubbing his eyes. Just then, Amanda came skidding around the corner. "Where's the fire?" Jesse joked. Amanda ignored his comment as she stopped to catch her breath. "In my path lab. On the radio." "There's a fire in the path lab?" Mark asked, becoming alarmed and slightly confused at the same time. "No, I heard it on the radio." The guys were truly confused. "The roads are flooded. There's no way you'll make it home, Jesse." "You can stay with me until the weather improves, Jess. You, too, Amanda," Mark offered. Amanda smiled and hurried back to her pathology lab to get her things.

Mark, Jesse and Amanda decided to drop in on Steve and Amy. When they got there, the house was empty. That's odd, Mark thought to himself. The trio sat down in the kitchen as Jesse heard the front door squeak. "Sssshh," Jesse hushed. "Did you hear that?" "Hear what?" Amanda asked loudly. Jesse shushed her again and stood up. He walked cautiously into the living room. Just then, the door burst open. Jesse picked an umbrella out of the bucket next to Steve's door and got ready to swing it. A tall figure filled the doorway. Jesse swung the umbrella. The figure lifted an arm to stop the blow. "You crazy, Jesse?" Steve asked, taking off the hood of his poncho. "What are you doing here?" "I- I- I," was all Jesse could say. "Give me that!" Steve tore the umbrella from Jesse's hands and put it back in the bucket. "Nuts," he muttered under his breath. Amy entered the house as Mark came in the living room. "Steve, you're filthy and soaking wet." Mark went into father mode. "Go get some new clothes on." Steve didn't argue. He was wet and cold. He went into the bedroom to change. Amy started to sit on the couch, but caught herself in time. She took a towel out of the closet and created a barrier between the couch and her muddy self. "Did you and Steve have fun?" Mark asked casually. What he really wanted to know was how she and Steve were getting along. "I- I guess so," she murmured. Amy was surprised with herself. There was this thing between her and Steve, but she couldn't put her finger on it. It seemed slightly familiar. Like what her and her father used to have. Before he started drinking... An uncomfortable silence filled the room and Amanda turned on the television to fill it. A television reporter was standing out in the rain. "The entire city of Los Angeles is under a flash flood warning. All planes have been grounded and-" Amanda switched it off. "I guess we'll be here for a while," Amanda sighed, sitting down on Amy's right side. Steve entered the room, wearing new, dry clothes. Lightning flashed making everyone jump. Except Amy. "One one thousand, two one thousand, three one thousand..." she began to murmur. A loud thunderclap shook the windows as Steve came in wearing new, dry clothes. "Well, as long as we have-" The lights went out. "-electricity," Steve finished. "Steve!" Jesse's voice broke through the darkness. "It's not my fault!" "Does anyone have a candle or a flashlight?" Mark's problem solving kicked in. "There's one right here." It was the most words Mark had ever heard out of Amy at one time. A brief flash of light followed. Jesse felt around for a candle and held it near Amy. Within seconds, it was lit. Mark took the candle into the kitchen and opened the drawer where he knew Steve kept his extra flashlights. He opened the drawer to find a whole assortment of candles and flashlights and lanterns. Sweeping as much

into his arms as he could carry, he headed back to the living room and bumped into every possible piece of furniture on the way. "Preparing for Y2K?" Mark joked. "You never know," Steve smiled and helped his father pass out the lights. When done, Steve settled in on Amy's other side. Mark sat in a chair and Jesse sat on the floor poking into the fire. "Let's tell ghost stories!" Jesse's eyes sparkled with boyish delight. Amy and Steve exchanged looks. Everyone told stories, but Amy's were by far the scariest, weirdest and longest. Jesse was about to start his fifth story, when Steve shushed him and gestured to Amy, who was now asleep against Steve's shoulder. Amanda and Steve made Amy more comfortable and put a blanket over her. Itching to talk about the case, Mark motioned everyone in the kitchen. The four of them settled around the table to discuss the case. "Why don't you think Amy's father did it?" Jesse asked, stifling a yawn. "For one, he has an alibi. Shaky as it is," Steve responded, glancing into the living room, where Amy was sleeping peacefully. Jesse rolled his eyes. Steve and Mark even used the same wording. "He could have paid someone to say he was with them." "And Amy was an eyewitness. I think she'd know her father," Amanda offered. For once, she actually agreed with Jesse. A chill went up her spine. "I'm going to have to agree with Steve on this one, guys," Mark said, sliding the brown file across the table and into his lap. "Her testimony is in here. Right, son?" Steve nodded as Mark pulled a sheet of paper out of the file and set it in front of him. "It happened in an alley. Amy saw him from behind; she was hiding behind a dumpster. Her brother was pleading for his life and he got shot... Amy made some noise and the killer shot at her... missed. She didn't even get a look at his face," Mark finished. "Were there any suspects before the father was arrested?" Amanda wanted to know. "Yeah, her uncle. Mother's side," Steve answered. On the word "mother," his and Mark's eyes lowered. "Was he questioned?" Mark took over. "Her uncle, Joseph Robbins, was a drug addict. He always blamed Richard for his sister's death." "Amy's mom is dead?" Amanda was horrified. "What happened?" "Cancer," Steve said simply. Mark changed the focus of the conversation. "He'd go to the apartment that Amy, her dad and brother and hit Amy's brother for money." "Why didn't Amy's dad try and stop him?" Amanda asked. "And why not hit Amy, too?" "Amy's dad, Richard, was usually at a bar or too drunk to do anything. And her brother, Billy, always hid Amy in a closet when Robbins came. For all Robbins knew, Amy didn't exist." "Did he have an alibi?" "Plane ticket said he was out of the state during the murder. But what if he never used it?" "Or he had a fake ID made and had an accomplice check in place," Steve speculated. Amanda had an idea. "What about the tapes of the hotel in the lobby?" Steve shook his head. "Already taped over before we could get our hands on them." "Darn," Amanda muttered and turned to Jesse. "What do you think, Jesse?" Jesse was sound asleep. "Not a bad idea," Mark smiled. "I'm going to go upstairs to bed." Steve stood up. "You can sleep in my bed, Amanda. I'll take a chair." "Are you sure?" Amanda asked. She didn't like it when people went out of their way for her. She preferred to do things for other people. Steve nodded and Amanda went into Steve's room. "Doesn't Amy remind you of Blair?" Mark asked. Steve racked his brain. Blair? Was that an old girlfriend of his? Then he remembered. Blair was the quiet little girl that saw her mother almost get killed by her father and couldn't speak for days. When her brother, Benny, was about to make an impossible jump from building to building, her voice finally saved him. "A little," Steve said. Blair had been through physical abuse, and losing her father, but she, her brother and mother, were now living as a happy family. Amy had no one.

Amy woke the next morning to the sound of a blender. For a moment, she expected Billy to walk in, carrying breakfast. Then, grim reality set in. She was never going to see him again. Amy stood up and followed the sound into the kitchen. "Good morning," Jesse smiled brightly. "You're awake?" "You sound surprised." "You didn't exactly strike me as someone who would be up early." Jesse glanced up at the clock. "Ten o'clock?" Amy put the back of her hand on her head and fell back in a chair dramatically. "God-awful hour," she affirmed. Jesse responded with another 100-watt smile and poured a greenish-yellow substance into five glasses. Amy made a face and looked up at him. "If you don't look at it, it isn't that bad," Jesse offered, seeing her expression. Just then, Mark entered. "Good morning, all," Mark smiled. His face fell when he saw the "interesting" mixture that Jesse stirred up. By this time, Amy had already taken a drink. Jesse looked at her expectantly and waited for a reaction. "Not bad," she lied. The stuff was awful, but she tried to be polite. "What's in it?" "I just threw a whole bunch of fruits into the blender and pressed liquefy." Mark slid a full glass across the table to himself and tried some. After only taking a sip, he set it back down. "I guess it's an acquired taste." Steve staggered into the room and ran a hand through his light brown hair. "What'd I miss?" "Try some," Mark offered and handed Steve a glass. He was going to get him back for making fun of the new shirt he got last week. "It's really good." Steve looked at his father and cautiously took a sip. He almost choked. "Jess, what did you put in here? A cat?" Jesse looked hurt, but to each their own, right? "Actually it's blended fruit." Steve wiped a small bit of the "fruit shake" off his lower lip. Amanda woke up a little later, but her hair was perfect and her clothes unwrinkled. When Steve commented on it, Amanda shot a look to Amy, who in turn, smiled back. The male occupants of the beach house exchanged glances and shrugged it off. After making a real breakfast, Mark and Amanda helped with the dishes and left with Jesse to go to work. Amy sat down in a chair and sighed. "Tired?" Steve asked, sitting on the couch. "A little," Amy replied softly. Remembering what Amy had said earlier, Steve asked, "Who are Sarah and Billy?" Amy's guard went up. "What about them?" "Anything, everything. Your life story." Steve wanted to know what Amy was thinking. It was almost mesmerizing looking into her deep green eyes and trying to figure out what she's thinking. Amy's eyes lowered. "You like tragedies?"

Jesse burst into Amanda's pathology lab, holding onto a patient chart. "You'll never guess who I have as a patient." Jesse looked like a five year old asking his mom for money for the ice cream truck. "I'm dying to know," Amanda said tiredly and returned to filling out autopsy forms. In hour ten of a twelve hour shift, Amanda couldn't care less who Jesse had as a patient. Unless it was Mercury Jones, the boxer... "You know what? I resent your sarcasm. I'm not telling you." Jesse turned to leave. Amanda began to count silently to herself. One... two... three... Sure enough, he spun around, unable to hold it in any longer. "Joseph Robbins." Jesse slammed the patient chart down in front of her and Amanda jumped in surprise. "Amy's uncle?" "The one and only." "What's he doing here?" "He's in jail for drug possession with the intention to sell. He's been complaining of chest pains lately, so they brought him in. Probably a fifty-fifty chance he'll need surgery. We don't need to worry about him getting out. There's around-the-clock guards on duty. One at each end of the hall and one outside the door." "I think Mark and Steve would be very interested in this information." A small grin crept across the pathologist's face.

"So that's it," Amy finished. "Dead mom and brother, convicted alcoholic father, and a druggie for an uncle. Talk about a dysfunctional family." "I know it's hard," Steve began, "but-" Amy cut him off. "You know it's hard?!" Amy blew up. "You can't possibly have a clue. My brother was murdered right in front of me by my own father. My mother died of cancer. My best friend- my only friend- was banished from seeing me because her mom said I was street trash. You don't know what it's like." Amy stalked out of the house as Mark came in. "What was that about?" Mark asked. "I tried to sympathize with her, but she just blew up at me. I don't know what's wrong with her." "There's nothing wrong with her. She's terrified is all. No one cares about her but you." Steve's breath caught in his throat. The more he thought about it, the more he knew it was true. He had his father, Jesse, Amanda, and his sister, Carol. Hell, he even had Detective Tanis Archer and Captain Newman. All Amy had was... Steve. "You know I'm right, Steve," his father said. And deep down, Steve did know it. "Why don't you go try to talk to her?" Steve nodded and left.

Out in the Sloan's driveway, Amy was shooting baskets with all the fury with in her. How dare Steve tell her he knew how she felt? Steve had no idea what she was going through. Then, he came onto the driveway. "What do you want?" Amy asked angrily. "I wanted to apologize and to tell you that your jump shot really, really sucks." Amy looked at him in amazement. His apology seemed genuine, but her jump shot was just fine. "Like yours is any better," she shot back. "One-on-one. Right here, right now." "I don't think so." "You're just scared I'm going to beat you." Anger filled Amy once more. "I'm not scared of anything." Amy flipped him the ball. "You take it out."

At a dingy warehouse, two men sat at a poker table, playing the card game of its namesake. "Three of a kind," one of them said through the thick layer of cigar smoke. He set down the queens of hearts, spades, and diamonds. "Ain't that too bad?" The other man, much more heavily built, fanned out a royal flush in clubs. Laughing, he scooped the money out of the center, along with a Polaroid photograph. "So this is the girl?" He picked up the photograph and stared intently at the teen. She had dark brown hair and the deepest green eyes he'd ever seen. It made you wonder what she was thinking when the photographer took this picture. "Yeah." "And Robbins will deliver the money on time?" "Has he ever screwed up?" "No, but I wanna be sure. I mean, she's just a kid..." "Oh, shut your trap. She saw who killed Manny and we gotta be sure she'll be quiet." He picked up his gun and began to shine it on the rag. Amy glanced behind her and back into the rearview mirror. Then, she adjusted it and turned around again. "Will you stop it?" Steve shooed Amy's hand away. "What are you doing?" "Huh? Oh. That truck has been following us since we pulled out of the driveway." Amy turned around in her seat again. She and Steve were on their way to the courthouse. "What?!" Steve fixed the rearview mirror and saw that sure enough, Amy was right. "You're right." Steve turned the car into an alley. The car followed. "Of course I am," Amy smiled smugly. Steve jerked the car to a stop and felt for his gun. His .9mm Beretta semi-automatic was where it always was. Pulling it out of its holster, he opened the car door. "Stay put," Steve commanded and got out of the car. Only, he forgot to shut the door behind him. The car behind them stopped and the driver side and passenger side doors opened. Two men stepped out, with guns similar to Steve's. "Give us the girl," one of them growled. "Why do you need her?" Steve asked, finger tightening on the trigger. He wanted to keep them talking as

long as he could. Steve felt a presence behind him and Amy was there. Amy walked slowly in front of Steve and toward the men. "Amy, get back here!" Steve shouted, grabbing for her arm. He missed. "Get back in the car, Steve." Amy's voice was surprisingly calm for the situation. Knowing Steve hadn't honored her request, she turned to face him. "Steve, get in the car. They'll shoot you. It's me they want. Steve-" Amy stopped at the same instant that several gunshots sounded. A blank look clouded her face and she brought her hand to her left side. When she pulled it away, there was blood on it. All at once, her entire body went limp and she fell onto the hard asphalt. Steve looked over at the two men. They had both put their guns away and were already halfway in the car. He fired three shots at the car. The side mirror shattered along with the windshield, but that seemed to be all the damage done. Steve knelt down by Amy's side and checked for a pulse. He was glad to find one, however weak. He placed his ear close to her mouth and checked for breathing. It was shallow, but there as well. He whipped the cell phone out of his pocket and called in an ambulance. "I need an ambulance to 156th and Walsh. We have a gun shot wound victim down. Pulmonary and respiratory signs are detected, but I don't know how long they'll last." Steve quickly hung up the phone, ignoring the operator's instructions to stay on the line. "Come on, Amy," he murmured, shrugging off his jacket. He wrapped it around his hand and pressed it against the wound. "Don't you even think about dying on me."

"Dr. Jesse Travis to ER. Dr. Jesse Travis to ER." The obnoxious voice cackled over the intercom. Jesse groaned and excused himself from his lunch with Susan. "I'm sorry, Susan. I'll be back as soon as I can," he said, standing up. He gave her a quick kiss and headed off. Susan just smiled after him. She had never been so in love with someone until Jesse. Just the way he breezed through life, but took work seriously. And he was a great kisser. Susan laughed out loud, but then covered her mouth when she saw people looking at her. She pretended to be very interested in her salad for the time being.

Jesse entered the atrium of the ER several seconds after he was paged. He saw a gurney roll in through the double doors. Racing over to it, his immediate reaction was that the patient didn't have long to live. The victim was a girl, about thirteen. There was blood everywhere. She had obviously been shot multiple times by a gun within a ten foot range. "I'm going to need..." That's when Jesse took a look at the face of the young girl. "Amy?" he breathed. Just then, Amanda came to his aid. "Jesse, what's- Oh my God, that's Amy!" Mark saw the two of them. "Get her to OR 4. I'll scrub and meet you in there." With that, both Mark and the gurney left. "He can't operate!" Jesse protested. "Conflict of personal interest," he mumbled. He went to say something, but Amanda grabbed his arm. "If you were in that condition, you'd want Mark to operate on you, right?" Jesse nodded. Mark was the best there was. Steve burst through the hospital doors. "Where is she?" He grasped Jesse by the shoulders. "Wait in the waiting room. You look terrible." Jesse pried Steve's hands off his shoulders. "Where is she, Amanda?" Steve could tell that Jesse wouldn't be any help. "Where is she?" He said the words slowly and carefully. "OR 4 with your dad," Amanda sighed. A small look of relief flashed across his face, before being replaced with intense worry. "Don't worry, Steve. Your dad's the best there is. If anyone can save her, it's Mark." "Sit down," Jesse offered, sliding a chair out from behind the nurses station. With a small "thanks," Steve sat down. After a few moments, he got up and began to

pace. "What happened?" Amanda asked. "There was a car following us and I turned into an alley, you know, just to make sure I wasn't being paranoid. Two men got out and they had guns and I told her to get back in the car and..." Jesse and Amanda exchanged horrified glances. "If I had shut the car door behind me or..." he continued. "It's not your fault," Amanda said. "There was no way you could have known... what was going to happen." "There's no way you could have prevented it," Jesse added. "All I had to do was shut the car door and I would have heard her open it and stop her before..." Jesse shook his head. "It isn't your fault," he repeated firmly. "But-" Steve protested. Mark came in. "Dad?" "She was shot twice in the chest. The first bullet hit a rib, but didn't do any serious damage. The second one punctured her lung. It caused massive internal bleeding, and her left lung collapsed. We were able to patch it, but she lost a lot of blood, Steve," Mark replied, face grim. "Where is she?" Steve asked for the third time. "In ICU, but Steve-" It was too late. Steve already dashed off to find her. "All true or sparing Steve the details?" Jesse inquired. "Unfortunately, all true. I don't know how long that lung will hold out." Amanda spoke up. "We'll have to wait and see."

Steve entered Amy's hospital room. She was laying on the bed, an IV imbedded in her forearm. Her chest rose and fell rhythmically, almost in beat with the heart rate machine. Her eyes were closed and she looked lifeless. Steve sat down in a chair, his legs unwilling to hold him up any longer. "What have I done?" he murmured. "Why did you have to be so damn... you?" he asked, although he knew that she couldn't hear him. She might never find out that Steve cared about her. "I'll find out who did this if it's the last thing I do."

"I haven't seen Steve like this since Tommy went blind," Mark said. "I don't think he was even this bad," Amanda remarked. "I remember when Steve was shot. I refused to leave the hospital for days." Jesse hiccuped. "I hiccup when I'm nervous," he explained. Just then, Steve burst through the door and raced down the hall. "What's with Steve?" Amanda asked. Jesse slowly walked into Amy's room and checked the IV, heart rate machine, ventilator. Everything was working perfectly. He left the room and shrugged to his friends.

"I need you to run these plates, Archer," Steve pleaded. "I told you twice, Sloan. You need authorization from Chief Masters or Captain Newman at least," Detective Tanis Archer responded. "I can't." She continued typing on the computer. "It's his day off and I really, really need this done now." "Sloan, I-" Tanis couldn't go on. He was looking at her with the saddest eyes he had ever seen. "Fine, fine. Make it quick." A broad grin broke out across his face as he told her the plate number he got off the car. "JKQT 317." After a few clicks of the mouse, she answered. "Oliver and Lucille DeMonte. They live at 19834 Beach Circle Drive. You know where that is. Right, S-" Steve was already gone.

"This is it," Steve murmured as he pulled into the driveway of 19834 Beach Circle Drive. He got out of his car and knocked on the front door. A slender woman, who looked to be in her mid-forties, answered the door pleasantly. "Can I help you?" Her voice was soft and it reminded him of Amy. "Yes, I'm Detective Steve Sloan. Can I ask you a few questions?" He showed her his badge. She seemed to be a little taken aback. "Yes, of course. Please come in." She stepped back to let him in. "Mrs. Demonte-" "Lucy, please." "Where is your husband?" "He's at work." "Does he usually take the car?" "Yes. May I ask what

you are investigating?" "There was a shooting at 156th and Walsh. I had the license plates traced and it came up in your name." "That's impossible. Our car is in the shop. Has been for the last week." Dead end, Steve thought. "What shop? Could you tell me the mechanic's name?" "It's the Main Street Auto Shop. Leroy Brown is our mechanic. You know, like the song?" "Thank you and if you think of anything else..." Steve pulled a card out of his pocket. "Please let me know." "Yes, Detective." "Thank you, ma'am." With that, Steve left.

"And give Mr. Johnson 100 ccs of morphine for the pain," Mark told the nurse. "Yes, Dr. Sloan." "Dr. Mark Sloan to pathology . Dr. Mark Sloan to pathology," the obnoxious, yet familiar voice said over the intercom. It was immediately followed by a series of sharp tones. He made a mental note to talk to Administration about getting the PA system replaced. Entering Amanda's lab, Mark was greeted by Jesse's grim face. "Amy coded. We shocked her back, but she slipped into a coma," Jesse explained. "I was afraid of that. What's the diagnosis?" "I doubt she'll make it through the night." Amanda put in her two cents. "Jesse, you make it a point she doesn't end up in my pathology lab." "I'm doing everything I can, Amanda."

"I'm here to see a Mr. Leroy Brown," Steve said to the receptionist. The woman ignored him and continued to listen to her headphones. She popped a huge bubble and flipped the page on her magazine. "Excuse me?" Steve said, a little louder. The woman blew another bubble about the size of her head. Steve was tempted to pop it right in her face. Instead, he took the earpiece and pulled it away. "Hey!" "Is Mr. Brown in?" "Is he 'specting you?" "No." "Then you can't see him." Steve showed her his badge. The woman looked up at him. "Right through that door." "Thank you."

"Mr. Brown?" Steve looked at the red '87 Cadillac and then at the feet sticking out from underneath it. A man, unshaven with oil on his face, rolled out from underneath. "Whaddaya want?" he asked rudely. "Can't ya see I'm busy here?" "Are you Leroy Brown?" "Baddest man in the whole damn town," he affirmed. Not only is he a mechanic, but he's a comedian, Steve thought. Swell. "I'd like to ask you a few questions about a car you've been working on." "What's the plate number?" "JKQT 317." Fear crossed the man's face before he responded. "I don't gotta tell you nothin'." "You can tell me here or downtown." Steve flipped his badge open. "Detective Steve Sloan. Where's the car?" "I, uh, loan some of the cars I work on to... friends. JKQT 317 has been out all morning." "Who has it?" "Um... I can't remember." "Will this jog your memory?" Steve slid his hands on his hips, opening his jacket and revealing his .9mm. "Uh.... um.... I can't remember the guy's name. Ken or Ben. He hangs out in the abandoned warehouse at the corner of 156th and Main." "Thank you."

Steve returned to the relentless beeping of the heart rate machine in Amy's room. The warehouse had been empty and he couldn't go home. Not with so many things there that reminded him of Amy. He sat in the same chair, only it was pulled closer to the bed. He remembered the first time he saw Amy. Her hair all over her face from the wind, her green eyes furious. He remembered splashing in the water with her when it was pouring out. He had felt like a kid again. He remembered helping her with her jump shot, which really wasn't all that bad to begin with. "I tried," he whispered. He fell asleep moments later.

Amy's hand began to twitch. Two fingers at first and then her whole

hand. It slowly slid across the bed to rest on top of Steve's. Her eyelids fluttered open and her eyes darted around the room. They finally came to rest on Steve. "Steve?" Her voice was barely above a whisper. "Steve?" Her eyes slowly closed and the jagged line on her heart rate machine went flat. Doctors rushed in and woke Steve. "What's going on?" he asked, but was ushered out of the room by a nurse. He paced a few seconds outside the door. Jesse left the room, face grim. "Jesse?" Jesse looked at Steve, sadness in his eyes. "Jesse, what happened?" In the back of his mind, Steve knew, but he was grasping at straws. "She's gone, Steve. We did everything we could to save her, but she lost too much blood. I'm sorry, Steve." There was no way... But she was just....

Steve woke up in a cold sweat. He looked around the room, and was relieved to see Amy still alive. Unconscious, but alive nonetheless. "Just a dream," he murmured. "It was only a dream." He looked down at his hand and saw Amy's on top of his. She had woken up during the night. Jesse came in, carrying Amy's patient chart. He looked up and was surprised to see Steve. "Did you spend the night?" Jesse hadn't seen Steve come back in after his mysterious departure. "What does it look like?" Steve was starting to get peeved. "Geez. Sorry." My, aren't we testy? Jesse thought, but held his tongue for his own sake. "She woke up last night, Jess." Jesse looked at him in surprise. "Why didn't you come get me or Mark or Amanda or Susan?" "Because I was asleep." Slowly and skeptically, Jesse asked, "Then how do you know she woke up?" Steve's eyes fell on Amy's pale hand, now dangling off the bed. Jesse followed his gaze. "Steve, that doesn't mean-" Jesse sighed and remembered to be patient. He had to handle Steve the same way he handled Mark when Steve was shot. "Why don't you go home and get some sleep? Real sleep. In a bed. Remember that?" "I can't go. Not with this on my conscience." "Steve, it's not your fault. If you had pulled the trigger, than it would have been. But you didn't and it's not." "But I could have-" "You did everything you could. You called an ambulance and kept pressure on the wound until they got there. A paramedic told me that you had started CPR when they arrived. It was you that kept her alive this long. And you know Amy wouldn't blame you for what happened." "Jesse-" "No, Steve. Go home. Doctor's orders. Or I'll tell your dad on you." Steve looked at him with a don't-test-me look. Jesse left as Mark came in the door. Mark silently stood behind Steve, watching his son watch over Amy. "Now you know how I felt when you were in that situation." Steve turned around, surprised at his father's presence. "I didn't know anyone was capable of worrying this much about one person." "Steve, when the lives of the people you care about are in jeopardy, worrying is all you do." "Dad, I know this is going to sound crazy, but-" "Steve, my boy, anything you say is going to sound crazy. I remember when you got shot. I look back and laugh at some of the things I said and did." "Dad, I can't-" "Yes, you can. I'm sending you to your room. You are not to come back for an hour." Mark pointed out the door to emphasize his point. "Dad, you haven't sent me to my room since I was a kid." "It's for your own good." "Dad-" Mark gave him a don't-test-me look, the same one Steve had given Jesse moments earlier. "Fine." Steve sulked out of the room, intending to come back after a shower and clean clothes.

Steve opened his closet to get a pair of jeans out and a box tumbled down. Fortunately, nothing spilled and he went to his knees to pick the box up. The box was marked "Halloween Costumes." Curious, he opened it to see his old Superman costume from when he was six. Steve had remembered bits and pieces of what his father said when he was in

a coma. People can hear what you say when you're in a coma. "I remember when you were six years old... Your mother made you a Superman costume for Christmas... You wore it under your clothes for a week... thought it made you indestructible..." "I'm not. Not by a long shot," Steve murmured. He picked up the box, put it back on the shelf and left.

Jesse entered Amy's room quietly to check the heart rate machine. He was about to write something on the patient chart when he heard a small groan. "Jesse?" Amy's eyes were barely open. Jesse smiled down at her, surprised she was awake. "You sure took your sweet time, Amy." "Huh?" She looked confused. "How do you feel?" Amy's eyes were now open and she seemed to be more aware of her surroundings. "Like I've been shot, Jesse," she said, as if it was the most obvious thing in the world. "Patient still has her attitude. That's a good sign," Jesse laughed. Amy's eyes darted around the room. "Where's Steve?" she asked suddenly, sitting up. "Was he shot?" She suddenly grabbed her side in pain as Jesse gently pushed her back down. "Is Steve all right? Jesse-" "Steve is fine. Right now, I'm worried about you. You can't move around too much until your lung heals a little more." "Where's Steve?" Amy demanded, looking terribly frightened. "He went home for the first time in two days." She looked slightly relieved, but a little confused. "Where's he been?" "Parked in that chair, refusing to leave. Mark had to make him go home. He really cares about you." Amy leaned back and sighed. "New concept."

"You know, I still can't believe Amy made it. When I was operating, there was so much internal bleeding..." "Amy wasn't going to give up without a fight. I knew that much. But you're right. My prognosis didn't give her fifteen minutes to live." "I was terrified she was going to wind up in my lab." Mark, Jesse and Amanda were in the pathology lab. Jesse had joined them last and given them the news. "What about Steve?" Amanda asked. "Has anyone called him?" The trio exchanged glances and broke out in grins. "I can't wait to see his face."

Steve entered Amy's room. The bed was empty. "Where..." His father had worked in the hospital long enough for Steve to know where the patients are if they aren't in their rooms and haven't checked out. He left for the pathology lab.

"Amanda!" Steve burst into the pathology lab, startling everyone. "Where's..." Amy's head snapped up from her book. She looked up at him from her wheelchair. Jesse and Mark gave him the weirdest looks. "Amy?" Amanda finished. "She's right here. Did someone forget to call you?" she asked innocently. Steve was too overwhelmed with relief to say anything. "Are you still with us, Steve?" Jesse waved a hand in front of his face and began to hum the theme from the Twilight Zone. "Do do do do do do do do..." "Huh? Yeah, Jess. Just a little..." "Surprised?" Mark offered. Steve forced a nod. "Did you find the idiot that put my basketball career on hold?" Amy joked. "Got a few leads, but..." Steve was grasping at straws. He'd have to go back to Brown if he wanted anything else. "Nothing really," Jesse finished. "He's trying!" Amy said defensively, then grew red with embarrassment over her outburst.

That night, in front of room 204 at Community General Hospital, police officer Tim Bradshaw was standing on guard. He had been assigned this job only because there hadn't been very many robberies and no other officer volunteered. "Me and my big mouth," Bradshaw

muttered. Just then, a piercing scream came from the stairwell. Bradshaw knew he was supposed to stay at his post, but went against his better judgment. He peeked in the door and saw the patient sleeping soundly. Another piercing scream echoed through the halls, but he seemed like the only person hearing it. In two strides, he had crossed the hall and opened the door. He looked around. Not a soul. Taking the steps three at a time, he checked all the way to the bottom. Perhaps someone had fallen and knocked themselves out. It didn't occur to him until later that one cannot scream while unconscious. He looked around, shrugged, and headed back up the stairs.

Steve was trying to concentrate on filling out the report at the police station the next morning, but couldn't. Amy's outburst told Steve that she didn't blame him for what happened. The words blurred in front of him and all the letters became one blob. He shut his eyes, just to rest them for a minute. Then, he slowly drifted to sleep. RING! Steve snapped his head up and tried to locate the source of the sound. Detective Archer was hovering over him. "You talk in your sleep, Sloan," she said, taking a sip of coffee. "Do you have a stuffed animal named Pookie or something?" Steve blushed. Pookie was his teddy bear he had as a kid. No one, not even his father, knew that he still had it. "By the way, that's your phone." He looked at her blankly for a moment before it registered. RING! Steve picked up the phone. "Sloan." All he could hear was static. "Hello?" "Steve.. Amy... gone," was all that Steve could make out. The voice sounded like Jesse's, only far away. "Jesse, is that you?" "Yes.... Steve... get... here." The phone went dead. "Jesse?" Steve hung up the phone. "Hey, Archer?" She looked up from her desk. "What?" "Cover for me. Family emergency." "Okay." Steve turned to leave. "Pookie." Steve's face grew red and he left.

Steve walked through the double doors of Community General. Jesse was waiting there to greet him. "She's gone, Steve." "What?" It had to be another dream. This was not happening. "I can't find her anywhere," Jesse explained. "What did you think I was talking about?" "Uh... nothing. When did you last see her?" "After I left Amanda's path lab last night. Then Amanda took her back to her room. I went to check on her this morning and she was gone." "Where's my father?" "Haven't seen him either. You think..." "Probably," Steve interrupted. "You check the parking lot and I'll call the house." Jesse nodded and left. "Gin," Amy announced, setting her cards down. "That's the third time," Mark, said, amazed. "Do you have cards up your sleeve or something?" "It's a short-sleeved shirt, Mark," she commented. Just then, the phone rang. "Hello?" He answered the phone in his usual, friendly voice. "Yeah, she's here." "Hi, Steve!" Amy shouted. "Yes, I know, son. I just thought she could use a change of scenery." A pause. "Tell Jesse I'm sorry. I couldn't find him." A smile came over Mark's face. "See you then." Mark sat back down at the kitchen table. "Want to see a card trick?"

Jesse raced back into the main lobby of ER, nearly knocking Steve over. "Was she there?" Steve nodded. "Said she 'needed a change of scenery.' He couldn't find you, so he discharged her and took her to his house." "But she's my patient. I don't think he has the authority to-" He took a deep breath. "It doesn't matter. As long as she's all right." "I've got to stop somewhere before I go check on them. See you later, Jess."

Steve stood outside the warehouse, gun drawn. If they were in there

this time, he'd be ready. He pressed his ear against the door and heard voices. Quietly, he slipped in. Peeking around a corner, he caught a glimpse of the two men in the car and a third one he recognized from the photo. Joe Robbins. What's he doing out of the hospital? Steve thought. He whipped around the corner, gun aimed at the three of them. One of them reached into their coat pocket. "Don't even try it," Steve warned. "I'll shoot you where you stand." "Seems you're a little late. The witness you were supposed to be protecting..." "You shot her," Steve said evenly, contempt in his voice. "You'd be surprised at the things people will do for a certain price." Steve fumed silently. "Who paid you?" "Why should I tell you anything?" said one of the men from the car. "Because if you don't, life in prison will seem like a picnic." "Oooh. We're scared." the other one said. "Quiet, Mike," Robbins threatened. Amazingly, he fell silent. "I am placing you under arrest for-" In one quick action, Mike picked up his chair and threw it at Steve. The corner of one of the legs connected with his head and he fell to the floor, struggling to keep conscious. He heard footsteps and began to get up. "Stop!" he shouted, ignoring the throbbing in his head. He saw someone run out the back and pursued them. When he got outside, no one was in sight. To the right, a tall woman was walking a poodle she had dyed... pink? To the left, a green pickup was parked. Even the best mechanic couldn't save that thing. Steve cursed, put his gun back in its holster, and headed back to the car.

"Do you want to play another game?" Amy asked Mark. "I'm sick of beating you." "That's because I'm letting you," Mark claimed as the doorbell rang. "Coming!" Mark opened the door to a sight. "Steve?" "Huh?" Steve seemed to be a little disoriented. "Your head is bleeding. Come in here." Mark stepped aside to let his son in the house. He shut the door behind him as Amy wheeled out of the kitchen. "You okay, Steve?" she asked, seeing that the cut on his head was bleeding freely. "Yeah, I hit my head," Steve lied. "On what?" Steve looked at them blankly for a moment, trying to think up another lie. "I don't remember." Amy shot a look at Mark as she began to giggle. The humor of the situation was contagious. "Really, though, Steve. What happened?" Amy asked. "I told you. I don't know." Amy looked at him and knew he was lying. Mark knew it, too. "Amy, could you get the cards out of the kitchen?" Mark asked. He wanted to know the real reason that his son was bleeding, and he obviously wasn't going to say anything with Amy right there. "What happened?" he asked his son quietly. "I went to investigate Amy's shooting and I got hit with a chair," Steve answered. "You got hit with a chair?" Mark asked slowly. "How'd that happen?" "Long story. But you'll never guess who I saw there." "Who?" "Joe Robbins." "Amy's uncle?" Steve nodded. "Isn't he supposed to be at Community General? With around the clock security?" "Not any more."

Mark was on his hands and knees looking under the bed his son was sitting on and Amy was gazing out the window. The trio had been searching the room for any possible evidence that could lead to how Robbins got out or where he was. Besides the obvious fact that he was a convict, he still had heart trouble, which could lead to a heart attack at any time. "We've looked through his room a hundred times," Steve said. "There's only a five minute window of opportunity and that's when he must have gotten out." "What?" Mark stood up too quickly, forgetting he was under the bed and banged his head. "Owww." "The guard, Tim Bradshaw reported screaming coming from the stairwell. He went to investigate and..." Steve began. "No dice," his father finished, rubbing his head. "I think I know how Robbins got

out, though." "Already? All you've been doing is poking around down there," Amy said. "Once he solved a case because of a bottle of contact lens solution he saw in someone's purse." "Forget I said anything." "Do you guys mind if I finish?" Mark asked, holding up a flashlight. "Anyway, he shined this flashlight out the window to an accomplice below. That accomplice came in and screamed to get the guard away from the door." "But weren't there guards at the end of the hall?" Steve asked. "Not on graveyard shift. Not a soul in the hallway. Listen, son, could you do me a favor?" "Name it." "Go down and stand on the sidewalk across the street. I'm going to shine this flashlight down there and tell me if you can see anything." "Sure." They tried it out and found that it did, in fact, work as long as the flashlight hit a dark surface. "But that still doesn't tell us where he's at," Amy said. "I think I know who to ask," Steve said, hand reaching for his gun. "Steve..." Mark tried to stop his son. "No, Dad. I'm through messing with this guy."

"Brown!" Steve shouted, bursting into the garage. Brown rolled out from under a car. "What- Oh, it's you, Sloan. Go away. I told you everything I know." "Where's Joe Robbins?" "I dunno." Steve pulled his gun and pressed it against the guy's neck. "Where is he?" "I- I- There might be a listing in my Rolodex out here. I don't know." "You better hope there's one." Steve clicked the safety on and reholstered the gun.

Joe Robbins was drinking a beer and watching TV. He was feeling a little tension in his chest, but he wasn't going back to Community General with that Dr. Sloan or his son poking around. "Police! Open up!" Steve's voice boomed through the door. Robbins pulled a gun and stood up as the door burst open. "Drop it," Steve demanded, his gun already trained on him. Robbins felt pain in his chest but ignored it. "I don't think so, Sloan." "I'm taking you in for the murder of William Porter and the conspiracy of attempted murder of Amy Porter." "Amy Porter? Who's she?" "Your niece," Steve answered, recalling the conversation he had with Amanda, Jesse, and his father just days earlier. He remembered the fact that Robbins might not have known if Amy existed. Robbins' temper flared. True, he and his sister weren't close, but another kid? One he would find himself helping in the murder of later? It doesn't matter, he thought. "Why'd you kill the kid, huh? He didn't give you money?" "Little bastard was holding off on me and I needed another hit." Steve stared at him in shock. Suddenly, Robbins grabbed his chest in pain and collapsed. Not quite convinced that he wasn't acting, Steve stood frozen to the spot. After a moment, he leapt over the couch to his side. No pulse. He was dead. Steve lifted the phone off the hook to call the ambulance.

It wasn't long before Robbins' accomplices were caught and convicted. Amy spent a few more days at the hospital for observation. "I see your red and raise you two blues," Steve said, sliding two M&M's into the center of the table in the Community General doctor's lounge. Amy studied his face and broke out in a wide grin. "He's got nothing." She, along with Mark and Jesse, slid the candy into the center. "I fold," Amanda said. "I never get any good cards," she added. "Straight," Steve said, laying his cards flat. "Three of a kind," Jesse muttered unhappily. "Full house," Mark grinned. Everyone looked at Amy. "Royal flush," she smiled, sliding the M&M's out of the center. The rest of the table groaned. "Heh heh heh," she laughed, popping one of her winnings in her mouth. "Is Amy's dad cleared?" Jesse asked loudly. Amy excused herself and left the room quietly. "Yes, he was released this morning," Mark said. "Took off without a

trace." Steve left as well. "That's horrible. What'll happen to Amy?" Amanda asked. Mark shrugged. Amy was sitting on a chair outside the doctor's lounge, knees up to her chest. Steve sat down next to her. "I'm going to become a ward of the state or something, right, Steve?" Amy asked, not meeting his gaze. Receiving no answer, she looked up into his eyes. "I'm right, aren't I?" Steve nodded. "For what it's worth," Steve started, "There's always a couch open at my house." "First place I'll go when I run away," Amy muttered. "You can't keep running away. These people are only trying to help you." "I know." Steve offered his hand. Unlike the day she met him, Amy trusted him and took it.

"Amy'd rather stay in love with me." The ending lyrics to the song, Once in Love with Amy from the musical Where's Charley? faded out as the audience stood up for a standing ovation. Mark bowed and tapped his tap shoes a few more times before leaving the stage. "And the highlight of our evening..." Amanda said, seeing Mark approach. Jesse made a noise like a drumroll and Amy giggled. Steve stood behind them all, looking very proud of his father. "Thank you all," Mark said, taking a bow. He looked at the "Community General Talent Show" banner and a small smile crept across his face. "Sloan, can I talk to you for a minute?" Captain Newman asked, suddenly appearing from out of nowhere. "Yes," both Sloans answered at the same time. "Detective Sloan," Newman clarified. "And by the way, Doctor, nice act." Steve stepped into the wings with his superior. "What is it, sir?" Steve asked, once they were out of earshot. "That Porter girl you've been watching..." "Yes?" Steve narrowed his eyebrows, not knowing what to think. "Yeah, well, her social worker has talked to me. She says you've had a positive impact on the kid. She wanted me to ask you if Angie-" "Amy," Steve corrected. "She wanted me to ask you if Amy could stay with you until they place her in a foster home." There was a silence for a moment. "That's what I thought. I'll tell her you don't-" "Wait, I didn't say that," the lieutenant interrupted. "Could I have a day to think about it?" Newman studied him for a moment. "Yeah, all right, Sloan. Let me know tomorrow." Newman turned on his heel and left.

The next morning, Mark came down the stairs bright and early to find his son at the kitchen table. Steve had told Mark about what the captain had said the night before and Mark was anxious to find out his decision. "So, did you sleep on it?" Mark asked, entering the kitchen. On his way past Amy on the couch, he had been careful to be quiet. "No," Steve replied softly. "I didn't sleep at all last night." Mark narrowed his eyebrows and Steve continued. "All last night... I watched her sleep. Dad, what if that had happened to me? I mean, I had enough trouble as it was after Mom died. But Amy... She lost her mom to cancer and her brother to her uncle's gun." "And she lost her father to a disease." "A disease?" "Alcoholism." "Oh." A silence filled the air. "Dad, I know this is a lot of responsibility, but... I'm going to do it." Steve looked up at his father. "I can't let her go now." He looked down at his hands. "Do you know what I wished for when I blew out my candles on my birthday cake?" "No, son." "I wished for someone to come into my life and change it... for the better. Minutes later, Amy shows up." He smiled ruefully. "You probably think I'm nuts." "No, I don't. What you said makes a lot of sense." "Now, I just have to talk to Amy." "No, you don't," a voice came from the doorway. The two Sloans looked up and saw Amy standing there. "How long have you been there?" "Long enough. Listen, Steve, I don't have anywhere else to go. The last thing I want to have happen is to lose you." "Amy, this is your choice. If you don't want to

stay..." "What? And have to change houses every few months? Steve, I like it here. With you." She smiled at him. "Besides, no one else will put up with me anyway. You probably heard what a joy I am from the captain." Steve smiled a little. "So I've heard." That evening, everyone gathered at BBQ Bob's. Steve, Amy, Mark, Jesse, Amanda, Susan, and even Ron and CJ had all shown up to celebrate. "In just a few moments, you'll be tasting the best ribs in the world. The sauce will burn your tastebuds..." Jesse began. "...And sear the lining of your stomach," everyone finished. "We know, Jesse. You said that half an hour ago," Amy said. "I know. And it would have been ready half an hour ago if I had realized that Steve hadn't put the ribs in the oven," Jesse said. "And you hadn't turned the oven on anyway!" Steve's voice came from the kitchen. Amy laughed out loud. A few moments later, Steve emerged from the kitchen with a platter piled high with ribs. "These will be the best ribs you'll ever taste, Amy," Jesse assured her. "Of course they will," Amy nodded. What Amy didn't tell him was that she had never had ribs before. And she never did.

End
file.